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The Spies of Yesteryear Offer A Lesson in How Not to Do It

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass., July 10 — Things are not quite as bad in the international intelligence community now as they were in the early days of World War I, when the President of France learned of a shift in the location of his army's general staff headquarters only after his chauffeur dated a nurse who worked there.

But despite vast technological and organizational improvements, the problems of assessing and implementing military intelligence today are essentially the same as those that faced the major powers on the eve of both World Wars, experts meeting here have concluded.

Military historians and officials of the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency reached that conclusion in an atmosphere evocative not only of stories pre-World War I intelligence organizations that refused to believe their own spies or share their information with their own governments but also of a new tolerance for the intelligence community.

The three-day conference was only one of hundreds that are held in this city each summer among the academics who regularly flow in and out of government.

Untroubled Acceptance

But the untroubled acceptance by the university and student communities here of this conference and its aim of aiding intelligence-gathering agencies by studying the lessons of the past marked a subtle turning point in the atmosphere. Half a decade ago such a conference as this could not have been held without at least a measure of protest, but today there was not even one leaflet or picket sign.

"Harvard has always been intimately involved in the diplomatic and military spheres, at least since President Woodrow Wilson's time and the League of Nations, and the period of the late 60's and early 70's was only an interruption of that," explained Dr. Ernest R. May, a professor of history at Harvard who organized the conference.

"There are questions important to historians that are also important to the intelligence community today,"

he continued. "Questions about the flow and interpretation of information and how it is assessed in light of the social, cultural and political issues of the day."

That view was shared by a C.I.A. national intelligence officer. "Obviously we are in the business of assessing intelligence and anything that can be learned from the past is of interest to us," he said. "And the pre-World War I period was a period of intense failure in terms of intelligence."

The failures were repeatedly sketched by the panelists, who said their research showed that the Russian imperial intelligence organization had a yearly budget in current terms of only \$600 and was occupied most of the time with checking reports on the loyalty of army officers.

Another panelist told of the French intelligence organization, which had only five officers at its headquarters and five in the field and regularly underspent its meager budget, while reserving funds for an annual Bastille Day dinner.

Suffered from Divisions

Both Russia and France, the panelists said, suffered from divisions between a right-wing military establishment deeply suspicious of a liberal or left-leaning government. They also had experienced civil war and revolutions that led to almost as many internal cloak-and-dagger operations as foreign intelligence operations.

The two main intelligence failures in that period cited were the refusal of the French General Staff to believe evidence gathered as early as 1903 that the German Army was planning to attack France through northern Belgium, as it eventually did, and the disclosure by the French in the weeks before the beginning of World War I in July 1914 that they possessed the key to the German secret code.

That disclosure resulted, according to Dr. Christopher Andrew, a professor at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, England, from an illicit love affair and the murder of one participant over a bundle of love letters.